Waiting for Hope

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Waiting for Hope

by rosestone

Summary

Percy hadn't expected his dream job in the Ministry to become such a nightmare - but then, not seeing the Death Eaters coming had been half the problem.

All he wants is an opportunity to fight back.

Percy woke up, and stared at his ceiling, and considered his options.

He could run. He could fight back. He could start his own subtle rebellion. He could give information to somebody he thought might be a member of one of the various rebel groups that had sprung up since the Dark Lord took over.

He could give in.

Or, in other words: he could die. There would always be eyes on on him, Percy knew; his family had drawn too much attention. The only reason he hadn't already been dragged off to Azkaban or used as a hostage to ensure their good behaviour was that everybody knew he and his family hadn't been on good terms for years, and that they'd fallen out over Dumbledore. The seed of suspicion would never die, though, and as a result he couldn't even trust that fleeing in the night wouldn't end in capture.

Percy had always known he was less a true Gryffindor than the rest of his family, and here was proof: he couldn't even bring himself to die for his convictions. If he were dying for something more concrete, maybe he could have managed it - if he were delaying pursuit long enough to allow someone else to escape, or if he'd had some way to strike a blow against the Death Eaters that would let someone else bring them down entirely while they were still off-balance - but that was beyond his reach. No matter how carefully he'd considered the situation, he hadn't come up with something the slightest bit useful he could die for.

The Death Eaters wouldn't kill him if he gave in, of course. Percy supposed they'd be pleased if he became one of the true believers, rather than one of the many people in the Ministry who were simply keeping their heads down because they were too frightened to fight back. No, that would be a death of a different kind. The death of his convictions, and of his belief that he was - or could ever be - a good person. He'd be a shell of himself, as surely as if he'd cast himself at a Dementor's mercy.

There was no way forward. No way out. And so Percy resigned himself to the only choice left, the same choice he'd made every morning since the Ministry had been taken: waiting.

He was so very tired of waiting.

The Ministry was the same as ever. Which was to say that it was awful - the air suffocatingly heavy with the fear of the people around him, every other corner hiding a Death Eater's smirk, the whole place unnaturally cold from the Dementors in the courtrooms - but still bearable, for now. It could have been worse. Percy knew that.

He'd been there the day they'd taken the Ministry. He'd frozen at the sound of screams and curses in the corridors, and had barely managed to regain enough sense to have tested his Floo and discovered it inoperable by the time the Death Eaters reached his part of the Ministry.

He had frozen again, then. Part of Percy had wanted to throw himself into the fray; more of him had known it was pointless. The Death Eaters wouldn't have attacked unless they knew they possessed overwhelming force. Percy, who had never been any kind of duelling genius, was not capable of turning the tide of the battle himself. Nor were any of the rest of the people in his department - and, for all he knew, some of them might curse him in the back. Only good purebloods made it near the Minister's office, even the back offices where Percy and the others did the real work.

Only good purebloods and the sort of diligent, hard-working Muggleborns who could work their way up the ladder through nothing but dogged persistence, and who could be satisfied with a lower title and a smaller office in a less important part of the building, and whose names would never come up on Ministry records as being part of the Minister's office.

There was no point in fighting. So Percy had stepped to the front of the group and played the stupid, officious Prefect to the hilt, and demanded to know what the Death Eaters thought they were doing.

They had Cruciated him. That had only come as a surprise because Percy had half-thought they'd kill him instead. The pain was worse than he'd expected, but then again he wasn't sure anybody *could* expect what Cruciatus felt like until they'd experienced it firsthand - and maybe not even then.

Percy had lost a little time afterwards. Not much. But he'd been aware again by the time the Death Eaters left. They hadn't been dragging any prisoners, or any bodies. They could have destroyed any bodies immediately, of course, but Percy would like to think that his colleagues would have been more traumatised by that than worried about him.

He didn't ask where any of the Muggleborns had gone, or how they'd gotten there. After all, everybody knew that the Minister's office only employed purebloods; to suggest otherwise would draw undesirable attention. And, too, everybody knew that Apparition was barred in the Ministry everywhere but a few select places, and that the only other way out was via Floo. There were no other exits - and if there had been, it was certainly not the kind of secret a Muggleborn could have been capable of discovering, not even a diligent, hard-working one. If there had been someone as unlikely as a Muggleborn in their offices, the Death Eaters most certainly would have found them.

Percy tried not to think about what had happened on the other floors. There must have been offices where the Muggleborn inhabitants were turned in by their own colleagues, or where people tried to fight back and were slaughtered for it. Surely most parts of the Ministry didn't have those secret passages, allegedly built by a Minister who wanted the ability to consult with the politically undesirable without creating a scandal. Surely most people had been bottled in before they'd known they were in danger.

Things now were - not *normal*, precisely. But better than that. The Death Eaters were watching everybody, but they'd already removed most of the 'undesirables', and almost everyone they'd missed in the initial sweep had managed to run that night. The rest of them were left more or less alone because somebody had realised that they needed the Ministry to function in order to create a semblance of legitimacy, and that the simplest way to manage that was to leave them to their own devices. At some point they'd probably want to replace

more key people with true believers, but that would take time. Percy guessed they'd start by drawing from the next few of Hogwarts' graduating classes, once they'd had a chance to evaluate the students' beliefs and perhaps even indoctrinate the younger years. It would be easier to teach bigotry to bureaucratically-inclined children than to teach fighters how to run a government, after all.

Percy did not let himself dwell on the sense of doom those thoughts made him feel. That was unsafe, both because of the risk he'd be 'overheard' by a Legilimens and because it might drive him to make a stupid choice. He had to keep his head down. He had to stay calm. If he waited, surely sooner or later something would break.

Percy didn't let himself think about that, either. Not while he was in the Ministry. But sometimes, when he was at home, he would find himself imagining how it might happen. Perhaps he would open his office door to find a familiar face rifling through his paperwork. He'd find himself at the business end of a wand, of course, but surely if Percy could manage to convince the Death Eaters he was harmless he could convince one of his brothers that he'd learned the error of his ways. And then he could help them with whatever mission they needed to carry out in the Ministry, or flee with them to whatever safehouse his family had been hiding in, or set up some means of communication so he could stay in the Ministry to spy or carry out sabotage... Something. Anything. All Percy needed was a way to help that'd achieve more than his own death.

Imagining that kind of future wasn't safe even at home. There was too much risk he'd think of it at the Ministry instead. But at least it was better than the raw despair Percy felt when he let himself know that it wasn't ever going to happen.

Nobody could get into the Ministry. And even if they could, they'd never come anywhere near him.

Percy had kept a routine before the Ministry fell, and he'd done his best to continue it afterwards. It felt ridiculous sometimes - they were in a *war*, for Merlin's sake - but he didn't want to allow the Death Eaters to force him to hide in his home. Even if it might have been wiser to.

So Percy went out, sometimes. He lingered over the vegetables in the little corner shop in Diagon, even when he had the unsettling feeling he was being stared at; he got takeout on Saturday or Sunday nights from one of the few restaurants still running, and tried not to wonder whether the owners of the closed-up places he'd used to go had left voluntarily or not. And, on the days that the Ministry's cafeteria served food he wasn't quite sure was edible, he went down to a little hole-in-the-wall café in a side-alley off Diagon.

His parents probably would have said something about acceptable risks. They probably would have been right, too. But Percy just couldn't take being locked up in his flat any more - or bring himself to eat his own cooking every day, or the Ministry's. He rather thought his father might have changed his mind if he'd ever tasted what the Ministry cafeteria called food, a fate he'd managed to escape by having homemade lunches every day of his working life.

So - having poked his head into the cafeteria and recoiled at the fishy scent of the lumpy grey stew on offer - Percy made his way into Diagon Alley for an early lunch. The café he liked wasn't particularly well known, so he thought he had a rather good chance of avoiding any of his unpleasant new co-workers, especially since he'd left the Ministry before twelve. A peaceful lunch, and perhaps a few strong cups of tea, sounded like exactly what he needed to get through the afternoon without succumbing to the urge to curse the Death Eater who'd been put in charge of his office in the back.

There were promisingly few customers inside - a young couple in the back door with the sort of faintly familiar faces that made Percy think he'd probably seen them at Hogwarts, and a dark-haired woman lingering by the pastry display. All of them flicked an uneasy glance at Percy as he came in. He pretended he hadn't noticed. It was quite a reasonable precaution, these days. The dark-haired woman's narrow stare was harder to ignore; Percy supposed she must have known one of his brothers, and was taking offence at his life choices.

The longer he spent there, the more sure Percy became that he must have known her, though he couldn't think where from. The woman wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to him now, but there was something naggingly familiar about her. Something he couldn't place at all. She wasn't an old member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team from any of the years his brothers had played, or any of their old girlfriends. Maybe a study partner? Or a junior Prefect, one he'd never paid much attention to? Or... someone?

He ought not to stare. It was rude, and also would probably also be rather unnerving for her in this time of war. But Percy couldn't help but sneak looks up at her as he ate. She was sitting not too far away, facing side-on to him, delicately shredding a croissant with her fork. As he watched she lifted her mug of tea, and -

Percy knew those hands.

He glanced up through his eyelashes, not daring to show his shock. Her face was wrong, her hair was too dark and too straight, but... she stood the same way Penny did. Had the same purse-lipped expression she wore when she was irritated and trying not to show it. Held her mug the same way, fingers curved underneath it instead of through the handle.

Percy's heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat, nauseatingly. It would be stupid for Penny to come here. She was Muggle-born, and while she might not have had the same name recognition as - say - Ron's friend Granger, she'd still been Head Girl. She might be recognised. If she were clever, which Penny had of course always been, she would have left the wizarding world as soon as the rumours about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had started circulating, run so far and so fast none of them could find her.

Of course, people had always said Percy was clever too, and now he was stuck in the Ministry with the Death Eaters and the bigots and the people who hadn't thought to run in time. Clearly intelligence in and of itself wasn't proof positive against getting caught in a situation like this.

So. Penny might be caught, and disguising herself so she'd have a chance at not getting dragged to Azkaban. Though... that rang false, now that Percy had put more than a moment's thought to it: Penny had always been rather scathing of the average pureblood's lack of

knowledge about the Muggle world, and she'd made a point of spending enough time there herself that she'd never lose her own cultural fluency. Why wouldn't she just have left? It wasn't as though the Death Eaters could have found her there if she was careful not to use her wand.

Which meant she was here on *purpose*.

Percy forced his eyes away from her, staring down into his tea instead. This was a line of thought he couldn't afford to follow. There was only one real reason Penny might risk herself to sneak into Wizarding Britain right now - and Merlin, it was a temptation. To have the ability to do something - anything - anything at all to allow himself to fight back -

When he glanced up again, she was looking back at him, one eyebrow raised. Percy felt his cheeks heat. Of *course* he'd been obvious enough for her to catch him; hopefully nobody else had noticed, but Merlin only knew.

Penny set her mug down on the table and rose. Percy watched her leave, so horribly tempted, knowing this couldn't be anything but the wrong choice -

But really, what else had he been waiting for?

He followed.

Percy had imagined how things might go when he and Penny met again, of course. In hindsight, all those thoughts had been embarrassingly juvenile and utterly unrealistic - even accounting for the fact that he hadn't expected a war to change his priorities.

It wasn't that things had ended badly. Quite the opposite: they had known that they cared for each other, and that it wouldn't be enough. Love only went so far when you had incompatible priorities, and they'd thought it was better to be mature about the whole thing. End it now when they still had happy memories, rather than dragging matters out to the bitter end.

Percy had wanted the Ministry. More than that, he'd wanted success there, the kind his father had never sought and wouldn't have wanted even if it had been offered to him. Percy had wanted people to see him. To know who he was, and that he'd reached the heights of power by nothing but his own hard work. He'd wanted to have the kind of power that Lucius Malfoy liked to flaunt in the faces of the less fortunate, and to use it better, somehow. He'd never thought that far ahead.

Penny's dreams had been less concrete. She'd always loved history, and she'd spun that into her own course of study, looking at great events in the course of magical and Muggle history and seeing what kind of impact they'd had on the other side. Percy had thought, before he'd gotten to know her, that he knew an unusually large amount about Muggle culture for a wizard; afterwards he'd known better. Even he had thought that the magical and Muggle worlds were far more divided than they really were.

Penny hadn't known what she meant to do after Hogwarts when they graduated. A Muggle university, perhaps, so she could deepen her knowledge of history. Or perhaps she'd find a job in Diagon Alley and write a book. Or maybe she'd travel overseas and learn by doing instead, rummage through second-hand book markets in a dozen countries and set her historical theories aside for the moment to write a travel book instead. The world had always been so much wider for her.

She'd never laughed at Percy for his ambitions. Penny was thoughtful that way, probably because she'd known so many purebloods who would have thought she ought to go back to the Muggle world if she was so interested in it. But Percy had known how she felt anyway. He didn't know how to explain that he didn't see her boundless world, or that the idea of floundering in a foreign culture made him nauseous with anxiety, or why power was more appealing to him than knowledge. And even as clever as Penny was, she couldn't understand everything. She couldn't understand that.

Percy had wanted her to. But he hadn't known how to bridge the gap. And so he'd constructed that stupid, stupid fantasy, one where Penny realised her dreams hadn't been enough and she'd come back to Britain to build herself a more ordinary future. Where Percy had been waiting, having already achieved the power and influence he'd wanted, ready to smooth Penny's way.

He'd known it was awful even then. Penny wouldn't have been happy living his mother's life or being a Ministry bureaucrat, and that was the most vital thing, wasn't it? But Percy had wanted so badly for them to be happy *together*, and so the fantasy had crept through despite his attempts to pretend it didn't exist.

Had Penny ever entertained the same fantasies? If so, they must have tasted as sour to her now as Percy's did. Penny coming back was no victory; Percy's desire to flee the Ministry didn't mean he would have been happy with her.

The joke was on them, really. What were dreams in the face of a war?

She stopped in an alleyway, shoulders tense. Percy cast a glance behind him - out of habit, more than anything else - and breathed a sigh of relief. Nobody was behind them, and they were far enough from the mouth of the alley to make overhearing them difficult. Not that distance precluded various eavesdropping-related charms, or an invisibility cloak, or -

"Can I help you?" Penny asked, voice even.

"I -" What Percy had *meant* to say was something clever. Some tidbit to remind her of their days in school together so Penny would know it was really him, or to reassure her that he hadn't turned. What came out was: "Can I help?"

Stupid. What if it weren't Penny, but some excellent actor under Polyjuice? What if she were Imperiused? What if -

Penny cast a silent spell and said, "Percy, you *idiot*."

"What -"

"Security," Penny said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Nobody's listening in. I could have been anyone, Percy, what were you thinking?"

"That nobody else holds their mugs that way?" Percy tried.

"I - ugh. You're right." Penny rubbed a hand down her face as she sagged against the alley's wall. "It was still stupid."

"Says the woman who walked back into this place."

A sour smile crossed Penny's face. "I suppose you're right."

They stood in silence for a few moments. Percy - who had once prided himself on his patience in comparison to his brothers - couldn't bear it. He was about to blurt something else stupid out when Penny stirred.

"Why did you follow me, Percy?"

"I - well -" Percy let out a breath, organising his thoughts. "I'll admit it was an impulse, after I'd recognised you. Possibly not a clever one, but it'd be rather an elaborate plot, finding someone to impersonate you who knew you *so* well they could copy such a tiny mannerism, just to catch me out -"

"Percy."

"I meant what I said," Percy said, low-voiced. "I want to help. It's nothing more than luck that I'm alive now, and I haven't been able to come up with a single damn way I can make a difference, only ways to get myself killed immediately, and... please. You aren't stupid, Penny. You wouldn't walk back in here for no reason. Let me help."

Penny stared at him, and for a moment, Percy didn't recognise her at all. It had been easy enough to see her in that stranger's face (Transfiguration? Polyjuice? Charmwork?) after the first moment of recognition, but now she was wearing an expression he'd never seen on her before. Sad. Tired. Far older than she ought to have been.

If it was familiar from anywhere, it was his own mirror.

"Some people," Penny said finally, "would take that to mean you'd do anything. Even a suicide mission. I don't think I could live with myself if I led anyone into that kind of trap, Percy. If you're looking for a hero's death, I need you to walk away now."

"I -" It would be easier to lie. But not fair, and Percy didn't think he could do that to her. "If all I wanted to do was die trying to help, I've had plenty of opportunities. It's not something I plan to seek out. But if it were the only way to achieve something greater... well, I wouldn't shy away, either. If it were worth it."

Penny let out a long sigh.

"I suppose that's not what you wanted to hear," Percy added. "But..."

"I suppose I should appreciate the honesty," Penny said. "And it's not as though I'd be asking you to be out on the front lines, anyway. We don't have a lot of people in the Ministry these days."

Percy bit back the questions that immediately leaped to his tongue. The less he knew the better, if he got caught. It didn't matter how much he wanted to know who *we* were, whether Penny was working with Dumbledore's group or someone else. Maybe she'd even started her own rebellion; Penny had told him about a Muggleborn group once that'd sprung up in the last war, first as a mutual aid society and then later as a way to strike back against the Death Eaters.

No. He didn't need to know, and he shouldn't. Maybe if Percy was lucky they'd both survive to the end of the war, and he could ask Penny about it then. But now -

"What kind of clearance do you have?" Penny asked. "I'd heard you'd gotten a promotion to the Minister's office a while ago, but I suppose the Death Eaters hardly would have let you stay there -"

"Oh, no," Percy said. "I'm still in the same job."

"They *left* you there?" Penny asked, eyes wide.

Percy shrugged. "It helps to know where the -" He tripped over his tongue. "Secrets. It helps to know where the secrets are. And all the little bureaucratic things that aren't important until they are. I'm the last one left who can reset the climate enchantments, you know."

Most purebloods thought themselves above maintenance jobs, so there hadn't been anybody in that office who cared to stop the Chief Caretaker and her lieutenants when they'd decided to invert those enchantments during the battle to try to flood the Death Eaters out. They might have escaped with their lives if they'd chosen to flee in the confusion, but they'd stayed to strengthen the floodwaters instead, and paid with their lives.

They'd done a good job. The enchantments were still stubbornly trying to carry out their last orders via sporadic thunderstorms throughout the Ministry, and so every few days Percy trudged down to Maintenance and reset the weather back to its normal, pleasant baseline. The job should probably have been given to someone who actually worked in Maintenance - Percy only had that particular authority because he'd worked odd hours and the Chief Caretaker had wanted some higher-up on hand who could reset things in case of disaster when she wasn't in the Ministry - but there was no way the Death Eaters would give that power to anyone else after the flood. One of them had already wanted Percy to explain how to do the reset; Percy had earnestly explained some of the process, using as much of the jargon he remembered from Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as possible, and to his relief the Death Eater had decided it was too hard to be worth bothering with. Percy supposed that was one more thing they were planning to hand over to the next generation when they arrived.

"They really weren't as prepared as they thought they were, are they?" Penny said. "I suppose the Death Eaters must have thought the other purebloods and halfbloods in the Ministry would have fallen over themselves to help out after the takeover."

"If they thought they could keep things running without us, I'm sure their purge would have been much more thorough," Percy agreed. "They'll get there eventually, if we give them enough time."

"So we won't."

Percy felt as though he could hardly breathe. This, this was what he'd been waiting for. Something he could do - something *only* he could do - and a promise to go along with it. This was more than just straightening a broomstick's twigs while it crashed; they were going to save people, and they were going to bring the Death Eaters down, one way or another.

"What we need is information," Penny said. "As much as you can get. The Ministry must have records about the Muggleborns they're persecuting, and maybe about the ones they might go after next."

Percy nodded. "They haven't targeted many Ministry employees' family members yet, but I suspect it's coming. I'm not supposed to have access to that kind of demographic information, of course, but... I might be able to get access to it." Percy had full access to the Ministry's archive rooms - excluding the parts the Death Eaters and various previous Ministers had classified above even his clearance level - and nobody would be surprised to see him in there. Those sealed files had warning spells on them, of course, but...

Percy had not, of course, been allowed to use magic during the holidays as a child. That hadn't kept him from researching increasingly complex warding spells to apply to his personal items during the school term in the hope that they'd keep Fred and George out. While he hadn't made the kind of study of cursebreaking that Bill had, Percy fancied himself rather good for an amateur warder - and if there was one thing Bill had taught him, it was that warding and cursebreaking were two sides of the same coin. Knowledge of one was very applicable to the other.

"If you could do that..." Penny was chewing on her lip, another familiar mannerism in an unfamiliar face. "What about the children? The Obliviators track accidental magic in Muggleborn children somehow -"

"It's an enchantment, an enormously complicated one," Percy said. "They don't send any information to the archives until an Obliviator's attended the scene to confirm whether it's actually a child or whether it's something else, like an adult wizard doing something stupid, or a powerfully enchanted item, or an escaped magical creature - and if you're worried about Death Eaters following along, that'd be far too late. What you need is some kind of eavesdropping spell, though every one of them I can think of has too short a range to be useful from outside the Ministry building."

"You could do it with a Dictaquill and a piece of parchment with Protean and ink-siphoning charms on it," Penny said, "but that'd be rather conspicuous. I wonder... there has to be some

other way. I'll get into contact with some other friends of mine who do that kind of work. If they can come up with something sneaky enough, could you get it into the room?"

"I don't technically speaking have any business being inside the Obliviation Offices." Once upon a time, Percy could have walked wherever he liked in the Ministry and nobody would have thought a thing of it. These days, things were different, unless he could somehow manage to ingratiate himself enough with the Death Eaters that they'd assume he was one of theirs.

There were those secret passages, though. Percy hadn't ever ventured inside, and so he might be wrong, but... really, what was the point of constructing something like that if it only went to one place? For all he knew, there might be a passageway straight into the Obliviation Offices. Even if there weren't, he might be able to get close, at least.

"I'll look into it. There's ways around the Ministry that not a lot of people know about - especially now - so there's a decent chance I could get in there." Percy paused. "Is there anywhere else it'd be useful to have some kind of spying spell?"

"Oh, probably. I don't know how much authority the Minister actually has these days, but it might be worth putting one in his office too..." Penny's watch, a very traditional sort with constellations instead of numbers, chimed softly, and she jumped. "I have to meet someone. And - you must be on your lunch break, mustn't you?"

"I suppose I shouldn't do anything suspicious," Percy said. "Not now."

"No, you shouldn't. Have you come here before? Come again - not at the same time or the same day of the week, don't establish a pattern -"

"My pattern will be the days the Ministry's food is awful. Nobody will think anything strange of that," Percy said.

"Good. Someone will pass you a message once we've got things sorted out on our end. I'll put some kind of code in the message so you know it's me."

"Pick something from when we were at school," Percy suggested. "From your research, maybe - I can't imagine there'd be too many Death Eaters who'd be familiar with that kind of history."

"Good idea." Penny hesitated. "Don't do anything stupid, Percy."

"Don't worry." Percy reached out and took her hands, cold as ever, and squeezed them. "I've waited too long for a chance to do something that'd actually make a difference. I'm not going to throw that away."

"I'll hold you to that, Percy." Penny turned and strode away.

This time, Percy didn't follow.

That was the thing to do, he was fairly sure. Two people leaving an alley together - even in this oddly abandoned wartime version of Diagon - would be too suspicious. So Percy waited,

and counted out minutes, and did his best to crush the hope rising up inside him into a tiny corner of his mind. That would be suspicious too.

Merlin. It had finally happened.

He didn't have to wait any more.

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